

ADVANCED >> Jackson Hole



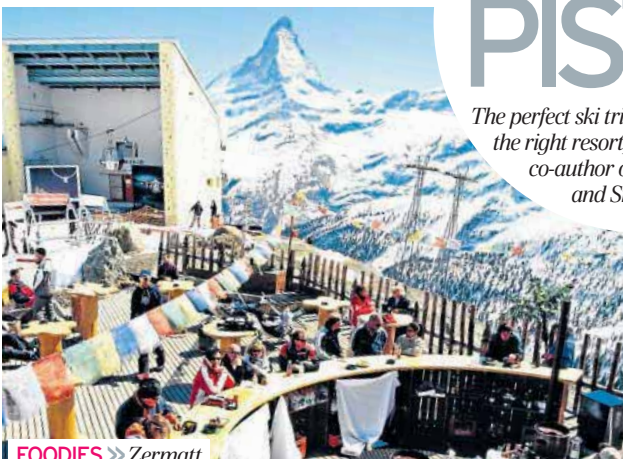
FAMILIES >> Avoriaz



PICK of the PISTES

*The perfect ski trip starts with choosing the right resort, says **Dave Watts**, co-author of 'Where to Ski and Snowboard'*

GIOVANNI SIMEONE/SIME GETTY IMAGES/HEMIS FR-4 CORNERS



FOODIES >> Zermatt



SNOWBOARDERS >> Verbier

Europe's principal resorts have been able to roll out the white carpet for the first skiers of the season, thanks to heavy snow across the Alps. Canada is also enjoying record conditions. It will be a relief to Britain's beleaguered ski operators, who reported that early-season bookings were at their lowest for a decade. Descent, Ski All America and Indigo Lodges were among companies that failed in the autumn owing to the financial downturn, while others have been forced to cut back on the number of chalets they offer – some of them by as much as 40 per cent.

With purse strings tight, Britain's

1.2million skiers are booking later and expecting more for their money than ever before. They are trying to save on transport, eating out, equipment and accommodation, but they should be wary of too much compromise over the destination. The key to a fulfilling skiing holiday, after all, is to pick the right resort in the first place. Here, we aim to help you do just that.

BEGINNERS

Soldeu, Andorra

Excellent ski school with a large section dedicated to teaching Britons, and which employs British

staff. Vast beginner area at mid-mountain with moving carpet lift; lots of easy runs (although they can be crowded).

Airport Toulouse 105 miles

Operator Inghams (020 8780 4444; www.ingham.co.uk)

Cervinia, Italy

Good nursery slope at village level with a moving carpet and very easy area to move on to higher up. Fast learners will be going all the way from top to bottom of the mountain on easy slopes by the end of the week.

Airport Turin 75 miles

Operator Alpine Answers (020 7801 1080; www.alpineanswers.co.uk)



Saas Fee, Switzerland

Large nursery slope at the bottom with no through traffic from better skiers and boarders. Lots of gentle blue runs to progress to up the mountain, including on the glacier, where the snow is usually excellent. Best in March or April as it can be perishingly cold early in the season.

Airports Sion 46 miles; Geneva 140 miles
Operator Ski Total (01252 618333; www.skitotal.com)

Breckenridge, US

Huge, virtually flat area at foot of main slopes on Peak 9. Long, wide, very easy runs to progress on to. Snow usually excellent, and ski school has a very good reputation.

Airport Denver 100 miles
Operator Ski Independence (0845 310 3030; www.ski-i.com)

INTERMEDIATES

La Plagne/Les Arcs, France

Now linked by the Vanoise Express double-decker cable car to form

the Paradiski area, which has some 300 miles of pistes and 144 lifts. Each resort on its own has enough terrain to keep a keen intermediate amused for a week.

Airports Geneva 112 miles
Operators Ski Beat (01243 780405; www.skibeat.co.uk); Ski Amis (020 7692 0850; www.skiamis.com)

Courchevel/Méribel, France

Two neighbouring resorts in the biggest ski area in the world – with 600km of pistes and 180 lifts. Ideal intermediate terrain.

Airport Geneva 118 miles
Operators Courchevel: Le Ski (01484 548996; www.leski.com). Méribel: Snowline (0844 557 3118; www.snowline.co.uk)

Banff/Lake Louise, Canada

Two contrasting resorts (Banff is big and lively, Lake Louise is small and quiet) in Banff National Park, each a bus ride or drive away from three separate ski areas covered by a joint lift pass.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Airport Calgary 87 miles
Operator Frontier Ski (020 8776 8709; www.frontier-ski.co.uk)

Bansko, Bulgaria

Budget option for intermediates (and beginners). Can't compete in extent and sophistication with other resorts, but certainly can on price.

Airport Sofia 105 miles
Operator Balkan Holidays (0845 130 1114; www.balkanholidays.co.uk)

Serre-Chevalier, France

Interestingly varied slopes above and below the tree line with terrain to suit everyone. Four separate resort villages, each with ancient and modern buildings. Good value for a major French resort.

Airport Turin 75 miles
Operator Erna Low (0845 863 0525; www.ernalow.co.uk)

ADVANCED

Chamonix, France

Traditional mountain town with fabulous views of peaks and glaciers including the mighty Mont Blanc massif. Huge amount of fabulous off-piste terrain to be explored with a mountain guide.

Airport Geneva 53 miles
Operator Peak Retreats (0844 576 0173; www.peakretreats.co.uk)

Val d'Isère-Tignes, France

Contrasting resorts that share a big ski area including some of the best lift-served off-piste skiing in the world. Best explored with a guide from a specialist off-piste school such as Top Ski and Alpine Experience (both based in Val).

Airport Geneva 143 miles
Operators Val d'Isère: YSE (0845 122 1414; www.yse-ski.co.uk). Tignes: Ski Olympic (01302 328820; www.skiolympic.com)

St Anton, Austria

Lively but attractive village with generally steep slopes including several challenging ski routes as well as off-piste bowls. Don't miss the Stuben and Rendl sectors, too – the latter served by a new gondola.

Airport Innsbruck 60 miles
Operator Mark Warner (0871 703 3888; www.markwarner.co.uk)

Jackson Hole, US

Steep slopes and heavy snowfalls have long made this a cult resort for expert skiers. You can stay in the touristy but diverting Wild West town of Jackson, 15 minutes by bus from the ski area, or Teton Village, at the foot of the slopes, which has new upmarket hotels.

Airport Jackson Hole 12 miles
Operator Ski Independence (0845 310 3030; www.ski-i.com)

Verbier, Switzerland

Big, fashionable, chalet-style resort with extensive challenging slopes including a lot of off-piste and long bump runs. Plenty of nightlife, too.

Airport Geneva 100 miles
Operator Ski Verbier (020 7401 1101; www.skiverbier.com)

FAMILIES

Wengen, Switzerland

Charming car-free resort reached only by cog railway. Spectacular scenery and a long tradition of British visitors. The extensive ski area suits intermediates and beginners best and there's a good nursery slope in the village centre.

Airport Berne 40 miles
Operator Swiss Travel Service (0844 879 8812; www.swiss-holidays-ski-snowboard.co.uk)

Avoriaz, France

Purpose-built, apartment-based, car-free and with good childcare facilities. The most snow-sure resort in the extensive Portes du Soleil, which is ideally suited to intermediates. There's a good central nursery slope, too.

Airport Geneva 55 miles
Operator Pierre et Vacances (0870 026 7145; www.pv-holidays.com)

Obergurgl, Austria

High, snow-sure and at the end of the road, so very little traffic. Its easy beginner and intermediate slopes suit families well. The family specialist Esprit has two chalets.

Airport Innsbruck 60 miles
Operator Esprit Ski (01252 618300; www.espritski.com)

Flaine, France

Its car-free centre right next to slopes is ideal for families. Good for beginners and part of the Grand Massif area, which has terrain for all standards. Concrete Sixties Bauhaus architecture is not to everyone's taste. Crystal features the central, family-friendly Le Totem hotel.

Airport Geneva 50 miles
Operator Crystal (0871 231 2256; www.crystalski.co.uk)

Tremblant, Canada

Purpose-built, traffic-free village with a real French-Canadian feel, at the foot of a small area of varied slopes. Good facilities for children. Can be perishingly cold at times.

Airport Montreal 87 miles
Operator Frontier Ski (020 8776 8709; www.frontier-ski.co.uk)

SINGLES

Ischgl, Austria

Some of the liveliest après-ski in the Alps, starting with partying in mountain restaurants and going on to bars in town with dancing girls and then on to the clubs. Also has good intermediate snow-sure slopes.

Airport Innsbruck 60 miles
Operator Inghams (020 8780 4444; www.ingham.co.uk)

Val Thorens, France

Europe's highest resort, set at 2,300m and usually with the best snow in the vast Three Valleys ski area. It is much livelier at night than most high-altitude ski-stations, with a big British and Scandinavian contingent crowding into the pubs and clubs.

Airport Geneva 127 miles
Operator Ski Collection (0844 576 0176; www.skicollection.co.uk)

Méribel, France

Some 50 tour operators boast more chalets dedicated to the British market than in any other resort. And the lively après-ski, mainly in British-run bars and clubs, runs from the 4pm "happy hours" until the early hours. The resort is centrally placed for exploring the Three Valleys ski area, too.

Airport Geneva 120 miles

Operator Purple Ski (01885 488799; www.purpleski.com)

St Anton, Austria

There's nowhere quite like it if you like to ski and party hard. St Anton's après-ski scene takes some beating, with a clutch of mountain restaurants packed with dancing revellers until after dark, when everyone skis down and the scene transfers to the town.

Airport Innsbruck 118 miles

Operator Ski Total (01252 618333; www.skital.com)

Verbier, Switzerland

One of the few Swiss resorts to boast a seriously lively après-ski scene, starting on the mountain (including a pay-as-you-soak hot tub at Chalet Carlsberg) and ending next morning at places such as Pub Mont Fort and the Farm Club. The slopes suit experts best.

Airport Geneva 100 miles

Operator Ski Verbier (020 7401 1101; www.skiverbier.com)

POWDER HOUNDS

Alta/Snowbird, US

Purpose-built, concrete Snowbird and chalet-style Alta are just over a mile apart in Utah and share one of the US's biggest and snowiest areas of slopes. They average 500 inches of snow a year (more than twice as much as some Colorado resorts), and it's usually the deepest and lightest powder of any major resort.

Airport Salt Lake City 31 miles

Operator Ski Dream (0845 277 3333; www.wandotravel.com)

Whistler, Canada

North America's biggest ski area, with phenomenal powder bowls at the top that get socked by storms from the Pacific Ocean. To make the most of the snow and terrain, try a two-day trip with Extremely Canadian camp – which specialises in “the Steep and Deep”.

Airport Vancouver 85 miles

Operator Ski Independence (0845 310 3030; www.ski-i.com)

Lech, Austria

Lech and Zürs share one of the snowiest ski areas in Europe. If it's powder you're after, this is one of the best bets. And it is one of very

few areas in Austria that allow heli-skiing. Lech is a pretty village, too.

Airport Innsbruck 75 miles

Operator Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700; www.skisolutions.com)

Fernie, Canada

Small mountain with lots of ungroomed wooded terrain and a good snow record. Best to have a guide – try the Steep and Deep Camps and Mountain Guide programme. Small resort at foot of slope and former mining town a couple of miles away.

Airport Calgary 210 miles

Operator Ski Safari (01273 224060; www.skisafari.com)

Vail, US

Good natural snow record and plenty of ungroomed terrain in the treeless Back Bowls and wooded Blue Sky Basin areas. Head for the latter for the best snow – it is largely north-facing, so the snow keeps in good condition. Big, glitzy resort that stretches for miles.

Airport Denver 120 miles

Operator Ski Independence (0845 310 3030; www.ski-i.com)

SNOWBOARDERS

Avoriaz, France

Avoriaz was one of the pioneers of snowboarding in France and the country's first terrain park was built here in 1993. The resort still leads the way and there are now four permanent parks (including the innovative “Stash” built in the woods) and a super-pipe.

Airport Geneva 55 miles

Operator Ski Collection (0844 576 0176; www.skicollection.co.uk)

Mayrhofen, Austria

Lots of British boarders base themselves here for the winter, attracted by the excellent terrain park and good off-piste possibilities. It's a big party town and home to the annual Snowbombing music festival (April 5-10 2010), which attracts about 3,000 revellers.

Airport Innsbruck 45 miles

Operator First Choice (0871 664 0130; www.firstchoice-ski.co.uk)

Laax, Switzerland

The huge terrain park and pipe here are among Europe's best and often

stage high-profile competitions. Good freeriding, too. The base area has accommodation for all budgets and lively bars and clubs.

Airport Zurich 93 miles

Operator Alpine Answers (020 7801 1080; www.alpineanswers.co.uk)

Les Deux Alpes, France

Good terrain parks (including a summer one on the glacier), decent freeriding, lively nightlife and relatively cheap prices for a major French resort attract a lot of snowboarders to Les Deux Alpes. The season started here in October with the Rock on Snowboard Tour.

Airport Grenoble 68 miles

Operator Peak Retreats (0844 5760173; www.peakretreats.co.uk)

Mammoth Mountain, US

This Californian resort is a snowboarder's paradise. It has lots of varied ungroomed freeriding terrain and no fewer than seven terrain parks and three half-pipes in 90 acres of dedicated freestyle territory. The resort has some lively bars but is very spread out.

Airport Los Angeles 305 miles

Operator Ski Independence (0845 310 3030; www.ski-i.com)

FOODIES

Zermatt, Switzerland

This car-free and snow-sure resort has the world's best mountain restaurants – and lots of them, dotted all around the big ski area. As well as excellent food, most have terraces with spectacular views of the Matterhorn and many have rustic little interiors with roaring log fires for bad-weather days. Lots of choice for dinner in town too.

Airports Sion 50 miles, Geneva 150 miles

Operator Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700; www.skisolutions.com)

Courmayeur, Italy

For good, affordable Italian food, excellent pasta and quaffable wines, both on the mountain and in town, it's difficult to beat Courmayeur. The village is also delightful.

Airport Geneva 62 miles

Operator Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111; www.momentum.uk.com)

Courchevel 1850, France

For no-expense-spared gourmet dining, Courchevel 1850 is the place to head for. The slopes are well served with good food and the village is home to two restaurants that each have two Michelin stars. But prices can be astronomical.

Airport Geneva 120 miles

Operator Erna Low (0845 863 0525; www.ernalow.co.uk)

Aspen, US

In town, Aspen has a fine selection of restaurants, many of which feature innovative modern American cuisine. And on Aspen Highlands (one of its four separate mountains linked by free shuttle buses) Cloud Nine bistro is the nearest thing in the States to a cosy Alpine hut, with excellent food and an Austrian chef.

Airport Aspen 4 miles, Denver 225 miles

Operator AmeriCan Ski (01892 779909; www.americanski.co.uk)

NON-SKIERS

St Moritz, Switzerland

There's as much to do off the slopes as on them. There's golf, polo and cricket on the frozen lake and a gourmet festival with chefs from all around the world. There are lots of upmarket shops and well-marked walks. You can try curling, take train rides and men can do the famous Cresta Run toboggan course.

Airport Zurich 137 miles

Operator Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700; www.skisolutions.com)

Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy

Italy's most fashionable resort attracts non-skiers who stroll around in fur coats with dogs in tow and have long lunches in the restaurants. The traffic-free main street is full of designer shops, the Dolomite scenery is glorious and a day trip to Venice is possible.

Airport Venice 100 miles

Operator Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111; www.momentum.uk.com)

Zermatt, Switzerland

Lovely car-free old village reached by train, with spectacular views of the Matterhorn mountain from the village and ski area. Good cleared walks on the mountain and easy for non-skiers to get around by trains, gondolas and chair lifts.

Airport Sion 50 miles, Geneva 150 miles

Operator Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700; www.skisolutions.com)

Kitzbühel, Austria

Beautiful traffic-free, walled, medieval centre with cobbled streets and elegant hotels. There's an impressive Aquarena leisure centre, a casino and a museum and it is easy to make day trips by train to Salzburg and Innsbruck.

Airport Salzburg 46 miles

Operator Inghams (020 8780 4444; www.ingham.co.uk)

WEEKENDERS

Chamonix, France

Only an hour or so from Geneva airport and with lots of modestly priced accommodation where short-stay bookings are accepted. Varied terrain on different mountains.

Airport Geneva 53 miles

Operator Ski Weekends (0844 4 06 0600; www.skiweekends.com)

Crans-Montana, Switzerland

Easy to get to by train or car from Sion or Geneva airports and with plenty of accommodation available for weekends. Sunny ski area, good for intermediates and with a glacier and views over the Rhône valley to the peaks bordering Italy.

Airport Sion 15 miles, Geneva 111 miles

Operator Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111; www.momentum.uk.com)

Davos, Switzerland

Big ski area shared with Klosters, just down the valley. Some excellent long runs of up to eight miles. Easy to get to from Zurich airport and plenty of weekend rooms available.

Airport Zurich 103 miles

Operator White Roc (020 7792 1188; www.whiteroc.co.uk)

Courmayeur, Italy

Charming village with car-free centre and stylish shops and bars. Small ski area best for intermediates and experts, who hire a mountain guide to explore off-piste. Less than 90 minutes from Geneva airport.

Airport Geneva 62 miles

Operator Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111; www.momentum.uk.com)

50 RESORT GUIDES

Our new in-depth online guides cover 50 of the world's finest resorts. Written by Dave Watts and Chris Gill, authors of *Where to Ski and Snowboard* (NortonWood), they offer comprehensive coverage of the best runs, restaurants, bars and hotels.

See telegraph.co.uk/skiguide for details and information on buying the guidebook.

ROSS WOODHALL/GETTY IMAGES; GETTY IMAGES/FLICKR RM



**Intermediate skiers
are well catered for
in the French resort
of Les Arcs**



The Arch in Chamonix, which has spectacular scenery of peaks and glaciers and plenty of off-piste terrain